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ABSTRACT

The current decline in enrollment has had a significant impact on teachers, curriculum, community relations, administrators, and facilities of the public education system. The current cutback procedures of teacher reduction-in-force have fostered a predominantly white, largely middle-class, and definitely middle-aged teaching profession. With fewer new teachers entering the field, the use of innovative teaching techniques and diversified programs may decline. Community relations between communities and school districts have not fared well because of the lack of convincing communication by many school officials. Administrators, after having developed the skills necessary to cope with almost continual growth, must now devise methods to manage decline. Many school districts have the dilemma of what to do with partially used or unused school facilities. A number of steps are advocated to achieve an appropriate master plan. Then the following questions should be considered: How might present surplus space be (1) affected by federal legislation, (2) utilized efficiently for other educationally oriented activities, (3) adapted effectively to suit future educational demands and clientele, and (4) leased or sold to other educational and/or noneducational agencies? (Author/MLF)

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COPING WITH DECLINING ENROLLMENTS

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During the Seventies, the trend in a great many of our nation's school districts had been one of declining enrollments, or, at the very least, of stablizing enrollments. This situation was brought about by a number of factors: the end of the "baby-boom" generation of students, improved methods and greater utilization of contraception, postponement of marriage, postponement of childbearing after marriage, smaller families, and the general economic outlook.

Depending on which "expert" you believe, the enrollment decline in America will continue virtually forever, or will turn around dramatically in the mid-80s, peaking once again before the end of this century. The truth probably lies somewhere between these two "gloom and boom" predictions. In any event, the current decline has already had significant impact on several areas of our public education system, kindergarten through college. These conditions should be identified and addressed by all who are concerned with the quality of future education in America.

Teachers

Because most teacher unions have adopted established labor-management practices, excess staff brought about by declining enrollments are now released in a seniority-ordered reduction-in-force (RIF) pattern. That is, the most recently hired staff members are the first to be released. And these generally consist of minority group members, the non-tenured,

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and younger teachers. Given such cutback procedures, the average age and years of experience of staff personnel have tended to rise, fostering a predominantly white, largely middle-class, and definitely middle-aged teaching profession. Question: Is this a desirable trend for a profession which is dedicated to preparing all youth for tomorrow's world?

Curriculum

Along with staff reductions due to enrollment decline, some districts are considering or have already instituted curriculum "consolidation" or retrenchment plans. With fewer new teachers entering the field, the introduction of new ideas, innovative teaching techniques, and diversified programs may decline as well. Considering that the children of today will be spending over half of their lives in the 21st Century, the challenge of preparing them for a life that does not yet exist and whose very nature can only be imagined is an awesome one indeed. It is imperative, therefore, that we recognize the rapidly changing technological society which public education must be geared to serve and take all necessary steps to prepare our youth for it. Question: Dare we allow the "back to basics" mentality to prevail?

Community

Perhaps the major reason that solutions to enrollment decline have fared so poorly with the general public in the recent past has been the lack of convincing communication by many school officials. Too often there has been little or no advance information about, or discussion of, the problems of the local schools. Taxpayers suddenly find themselves faced with new problems and new solutions without any real evidence

of commensurate long-range planning. School officials, therefore, must make a concerted effort to keep the public aware of their activities and concerns, if they expect to have public support. Question: Can we afford not to keep our communities properly apprised of our school problems?

Administrators

In addition to the teacher, curriculum and community problems just noted, school administrators have their own unique problems created by declining enrollments. After having developed the skills necessary to cope with almost continual growth, administrators must now devise methods to manage decline. For the first time in the experience of most school administrators, they will be administering "less" rather than "more." And because very little is known about this phenomenon, especially establishing priorities, administrators will find their assignments increasingly difficult. Question: Are the administrative practices of today viable for tomorrow?

School Facilities

American education faces no greater challenge than the necessity of planning effectively for the future. Today, perhaps more than ever before, effective long-range planning for all school districts is an imperative. While just a few short years ago schools were often overcrowded, necessitating double sessions, many of these same facilities now have empty rooms. Many districts have empty schools. The dilemma now is, what can or should be done with these partially-use or unused school facilities?

To begin, this period of enrollment decline or stabliza-

tion should be seen as ideal for review and re-evaluation of our present programs and facilities, as well as an opportunity for serious long-range planning. The times seem both to permit and to promote more and better educational planning.

But how should such planning be approached? Aside from whatever the enrollment trends may be for a school district, the major objective of educational planning must be the improvement of the curriculum and its delivery system. And this cannot be achieved effectively without a "master plan" which is a comprehensive statement of long-range goals, together with a strategy for their implementation.

Master Plan

To develop an appropriate master plan, the following steps are advocated:

1. Review and evaluate present programs and practices in light of current statutory regulations, and trends and innovations, at both the state and national levels.
2. Examine and appraise existing school facilities and sites in terms of their structural abilities to accommodate curricular change.
3. Conduct community-wide surveys to determine the economic growth potential and its resultant impact on local education in the future.
4. Execute annual preschool censuses and district-wide enrollment projections for comparison and evaluation.
5. Prepare for possible purchase, lease or sale of school sites and school buildings.
6. Develop an ongoing public dissemination program of the school district's activities, concerns, and objectives.

(It must be stressed that carrying out the six steps just listed and developing a master plan based on the data obtained are no mean tasks and will involve many individuals and months of discussion, research, visitation and writing.)

Implementation Strategy

Having created a master plan, how is it applied to the problems of space surplus caused by declining enrollments? Assuming a genuine commitment to educational improvement, the following questions should be considered:

1. How might present surplus space be affected by federal legislation?

In recent years several pieces of federal legislation have been enacted and specific compliance dates set which could have an impact on the use of surplus facilities. These laws are: the Education Amendments of 1972 (Title IX - Prohibition of Sex Discrimination in Education), Section 504 of Public Law 93-112 of 1973 (Accessibility - Rehabilitation Act), Public Law 94-142 of 1975 (Education of All Handicapped Children Act), Public Law 94-482 (Vocational Amendments of 1976), and Public Law 95-619 (National Energy Conservation Policy Act of 1978).

Each of these Acts requires attention be directed to specific constituencies and each has potentially significant space use ramifications. While all administrators should be fully acquainted with these legislative mandates and have probably initiated some compliance plans, it would be prudent for all districts having surplus facilities to re-evaluate them in terms of fulfilling the requirements of these laws.

2. How might present surplus space be utilized efficiently

for other educationally-oriented activities?

While some surplus space can be expected to lend itself satisfactorily to the fulfillment of the above-mentioned federal legislation, some may be, by nature, unsuited without major structural modifications. Such space can and should be considered for use as locations for alternative educational programs; daycare centers; preschool; night school; community centers; district administrative offices and even as temporary housing for classes while other facilities are being remodeled or renovated. The keys in making these decisions will be the type, size, condition and location of the facilities.

3. How might present surplus space be adapted effectively to suit future educational demands and clientele?

Even though a school district may possess surplus space at the moment, the need for additional space to accommodate curricular expansion in the future must not be overlooked. Also, school districts must not ignore (as many did in the past) the warnings of demographers who are now predicting another upturn in school populations in the not-too-distant future. While this applies mainly to elementary facilities, eventually it would be district-wide. In any case, facilities must be able to support future curricula.

4. How might present surplus space be leased or sold to other educational and/or non-educational agencies?

Most school officials and their boards of education are loath to relinquish possession or control of existing school property. Recognizing that it had often been a struggle originally to secure those buildings, this is a natural reaction. However, assuming that the present surplus facilities need not

be used for federal legislation compliance, cannot be used efficiently for other educationally-oriented activities, and cannot be modified effectively (or economically) for future educational demands and clientele, the issue becomes one of determining how best to dispose of excess school space.

Once again, because of the understandable reluctance of school districts to divest themselves of hard-won facilities, the first solution is to lease the properties to other public or private agencies with the agreement that the facilities will revert to the local district, should the need for them arise. In the event that long-range planning indicates no further need for present surplus space, the final solution is to sell the buildings to whatever agencies, organizations or businesses that can function within the zoning regulations governing the sites.

Summary

Rarely have school districts had the opportunity for an in-depth examination of themselves as this period of enrollment decline now affords. The need for thoughtful, intelligent planning for education in the future cannot be denied. It is up to both the educators and laypeople of this nation to accept the challenge. Administrators, board members and teachers, however, must take the lead and begin today to formulate the educational policies of tomorrow.

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